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magazine

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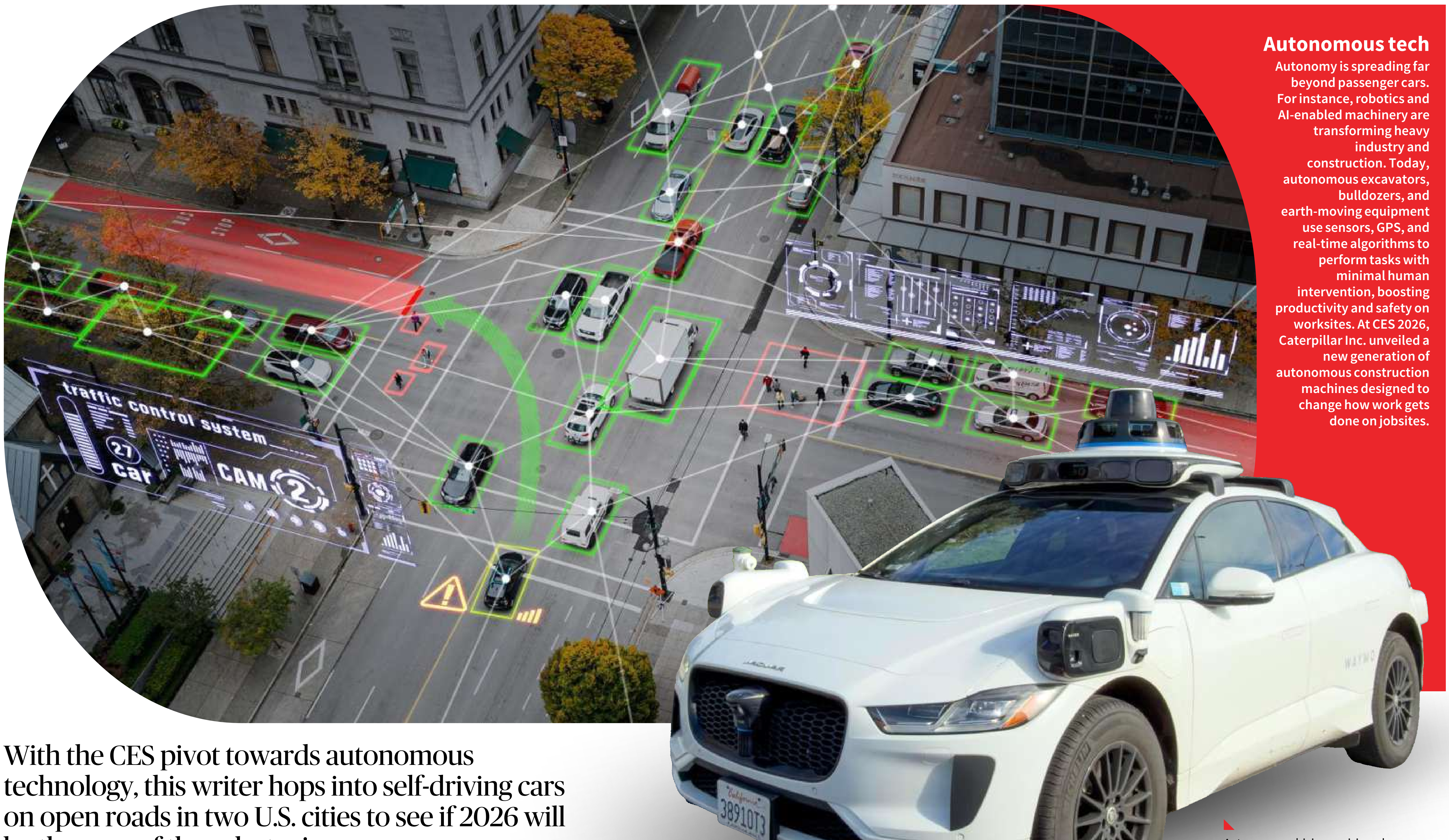

Autonomous tech

Autonomy is spreading far beyond passenger cars. For instance, robotics and AI-enabled machinery are transforming heavy industry and construction. Today, autonomous excavators, bulldozers, and earth-moving equipment use sensors, GPS, and real-time algorithms to perform tasks with minimal human intervention, boosting productivity and safety on worksites. At CES 2026, Caterpillar Inc. unveiled a new generation of autonomous construction machines designed to change how work gets done on jobsites.

Autonomous driving envisioned in a smart city; and (above) a Waymo car. (GETTY IMAGES)

With the CES pivot towards autonomous technology, this writer hops into self-driving cars on open roads in two U.S. cities to see if 2026 will be the year of the robotaxi

INSIDE THE DRIVERLESS AGE

Nitin Chaudhary

At CES (Consumer Electronics Show) 2026 in Las Vegas, a man sits blindfolded in a self-driving personal mobility chair as it calmly navigates a crowded convention hall. Around him, a LiDAR-equipped, voice-controlled scooter threads its way through clusters of staring visitors, while an autonomous robotaxi announces its arrival not with a horn, but with glowing LED initials projected from a halo on its roof.

None of it feels futuristic in the old sci-fi sense. It feels oddly casual, almost playful.

For the first time since the early 2020s, electric vehicles took a back seat at CES, while autonomous vehicles (AVs) surged ahead. Across convention halls and demo zones, the message was unmistakable: the driverless age has become a reality. The question hanging in the air was whether 2026 might be the breakout year for robotaxis.

But while Las Vegas hosted the spectacle, the real testing ground lay elsewhere: on ordinary streets, amid pedestrians, reckless drivers, delivery trucks, and in general, unpredictable human behaviour. To understand what this future feels like when it collides with daily life, I go not to a convention hall but to two cities quietly living inside the experiment: Austin and Las Vegas.

From convention halls to city streets

My sojourn starts one evening in Austin when I bump into Jeff, a local guide, as he walks down South Congress Avenue with his cohort. "This is the most Instagrammable mural in Austin," he says, pointing to a bland peach-coloured wall graffitied across which, in red, are the words 'I love you so much'.

I tell him that I am visiting from Dallas to study the AVs that seem to be crawling all over the city. Jeff looks up to ask: "And did you risk getting into one?"

"Yes, I did. Many times," I reply. I had spent the whole day stepping in and out of Waymo robotaxis (more on that later).

Jeff looks surprised at my audacity to ride in a vehicle that drives by itself.

"On these Texan streets!" he exclaims. "I drive a truck, and I still feel unsafe!"

I mention offhandedly that I felt safe riding in these vehicles.

"Till they're not...!" Jeff says, waving goodbye.

Indeed, not all the signals have been reassuring. Recently, a Waymo robotaxi struck a child near an elementary school in Santa Monica, triggering a federal safety investigation. The child sustained minor injuries, but the incident serves as a reminder that even today's most advanced autonomous systems can struggle in complex, unpredictable environments such as school zones.

Test bed for autonomous cars

Austin has rapidly evolved into one of the biggest tech hubs in the U.S., attracting big names, including Meta, Google, Oracle, Tesla, Snap, and Apple. If government initiatives to boost growth outside traditional centres draw companies to Austin, the promise of lower costs of living, cultural openness, job surplus, and flexibility to work remotely post-pandemic have seen tech workers flock here from Silicon Valley.

Austin is also where many AV companies are testing their fleets. At least three – Zoox, Tesla, and Waymo. I am determined to try them all.

But where can I spot one? The hotel receptionist directs me to Rainey Street, a residential neighbourhood turned laid-back nightlife hotspot. On a Friday night, the boundaries between where the eateries end and the road begins have blurred. Vehicles navigate this confusion carefully, moving in gentle hiccups.

"Look!" my partner points. It is a Tesla with a vacant driver's seat. A person is in the front passenger seat, carefully monitoring the surroundings, ready to take over in case the car does something funny. I stand gaping as the car slickly navigates the pedestrians around it.

The next morning, as I sit at breakfast, I spot a Chinese-origin man at the next table wearing a Tesla T-shirt. Michael turns out to be a Tesla employee of seven years. Over bland coffee and crusty muffins, I describe to him my first encounter with a driverless Tesla.

"You'll see more of those in the coming years," says Michael. "But did you notice that the RoboTaxi logo was scratched off the car?"

I hadn't. I ask him why.

"That's because we were seeing a backlash. Both against Elon Musk, given his political affiliations, and against our driverless cars in general. So, Tesla started removing the RoboTaxi logos. Otherwise, people were hitting these cars."

I later learn that many in Austin have expressed fears about the reliability and safety of autonomous vehicles, particularly Tesla's, which have reportedly failed to stop at hazards or stop signs. But I am still determined to ride in one.

Riding a Tesla RoboTaxi requires prior registration. Ours hasn't come through. So, we decide to hail the next best alternative, a Waymo robotaxi.

Alphabet's autonomous driving division, Waymo began testing in Austin as early as 2015. It now operates several fully autonomous, all-electric Jaguars across roughly 90 square miles of the city.

The Waymo cars are white sedans with a large spinning unit on top, which is a 360-degree Light Detection and Ranging sensor (LiDAR) that uses laser beams to create a detailed 3D map of the surroundings. I order one through the Uber app. It arrives and neatly parks beside me. I unlock it and begin the trip entirely through the app. Inside, it is luxurious and quiet. Through the interface, I direct the car to start, and once it does, it feels like being in a normal taxi, except for the missing driver. The steering wheel twists and turns as the vehicle follows the route displayed on a large screen in the middle of the dashboard.

It seamlessly merges into Austin's traffic. Locals don't even turn their heads when one passes. By the end of my two-day Austin stay, I have taken eight Waymo rides, feeling secure in each.

Two paths to autonomy

After the CES conversations and my first encounters, I reach out to Chinmay Chaudhary who works at Stellantis, the parent company of brands such as Jeep, Chrysler, etc. He offers a grounded, industry-facing perspective on why AVs behave so differently depending on who builds them.

When I describe my Waymo rides, he immediately frames them not as a technological marvel but as a business model. "Waymo is more of a fleet ownership model. You can only avail it in specific towns where they run currently," he says. In other words, Waymo doesn't sell autonomy to individuals. It deploys it selectively, city by city, street by street. That selectiveness, he explains, is precisely why the experience feels so polished. "Waymo is specifically based out of a geofence network. It performs better in a closed vicinity where everything is mapped." Seen through that lens, it makes sense that the Waymo is executing on a script rehearsed endlessly on Austin's streets.

This contrasts with Tesla's approach, Chaudhary points out. "Tesla's is like a personal ownership model. You can buy the car out of the showroom and start using it," he says. Where Waymo centralises risk and control, Tesla distributes it by placing experimental autonomy directly into the hands of individual drivers and onto unmapped streets. That openness may explain both Tesla's scale and the anxiety surrounding it. "It's not that one technology is better than the other," Chaudhary cautions. "It's how well you master it."

Market size

Estimates vary widely since autonomous driving is still a nascent market. According to U.S.-based Grand View Research, the global autonomous vehicle market is projected at $86.3 billion in 2025, and is expected to reach $214.32 billion by 2030.

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AT THE RAMZAN TABLE

Writing on Muslim food reflects an inwardness, with recipes shaped by memory, ethics, and care

Sudha G. Tilak

Ramzan announces itself quietly. Not only through fasting or prayer, but through kitchens, both domestic and devotional, where waste is avoided and food is prepared with a heightened sense of purpose.

Across the Islamic world, from Istanbul to Sylhet, Fez to London, Kashmir to Kayalpattinam, Ramzan cooking has always held a careful balance: fasting and feasting, restraint and generosity. Some of the most thoughtful writing on Muslim food reflects this inwardness, offering recipes shaped by memory, ethics, and care.

One of the most moving explorations of this philosophy is Turkish food scholar Nevin Halici's *Sufi Cuisine*. Rooted in Konya, the city of Rumi and the Mevlevi order, the book treats cooking as a spiritual act. "For the Sufis, food was sacred, cooking was a form of prayer, and eating was a blessed activity," Halici explains. The kitchen, she says, held the soul of the Sufi lodge. Initiation into spiritual life often began not with scripture, but by learning to cook and serve others.

The book is suffused with poetry and restraint highlighting grain stews, yoghurt soups, and the ritual dish *ashura*, cooked communally during periods of mourning. "Nutrition is important in Sufi cuisine because worship is possible only in wellness," Halici notes, adding that moderation and sharing are as central as flavour. It is a way of thinking about food that resonates deeply during Ramzan, when restraint itself becomes a form of mindfulness.

Cooking as anchor

If Sufi cuisine turns inward, the James Beard award-winning cookbook, *Feast: Food of the Islamic World*, by Anissa Helou looks outward. One of the most comprehensive works on Muslim food cultures, *Feast* spans geographies, from North Africa and the Levant to Central and Southeast Asia. Helou writes with the authority of a scholar and the clarity of a teacher, showing how Islamic cuisines evolved through trade routes, migration and empire. Her food – soups, breads, lentils, slow-cooked stews – is rarely showy, but it reflects the everyday nourishment that sustains long fasting days across cultures.

From Morocco comes a more personal, fiercely contemporary voice. Chef Najat Kaanache's *Najat* is part memoir, part culinary manifesto. Born to Moroccan parents and trained in some of the world's most celebrated kitchens, Kaanache returned to Fez to open Nur, a restaurant rooted in Moroccan tradition but unafraid of modern expression. "Food is history, culture, geography," she says. "Food is also politics." For her, a *chakcouka* made with eggs, tofu, and tomatoes "makes for a comforting dish". During Ramzan, such humble, deeply sustaining food feels especially resonant.

GETTY IMAGES

Ramzan food writing in Britain has also been shaped by migration and memory. In the gorgeously produced *Rooza*, Nadiya Hussain lists Ramzan specialities across the globe but spotlights her Bangladeshi roots with warmth and accessibility. "As a child of immigrants, I never understood the importance of the food my grandparents and parents left behind," Hussain reflects. "Now I see how food connects us to our heritage." The book moves gently through Ramzan and Eid, offering *khichuri*, *bhortas* and sweets, not as nostalgia but as lived practice. Hussain speaks often about balance: "Life will always be busy, but it's about making time to cook slow, or cook fast, without ever compromising on flavour."

That sensibility is echoed in the work of Dina Begum, whose *Made in Bangladesh* foregrounds East Bengali cuisine with simplicity and care. For Begum, festive meals are nourishing plates like *khichuri* with *chana bhuna*, light *dals*, vegetable *bhortas*. She often returns to the idea of food as comfort for immigrant communities, where markets and everyday home cooking become anchors, especially during Ramzan, connecting families to memory and wellbeing.

Season of stories

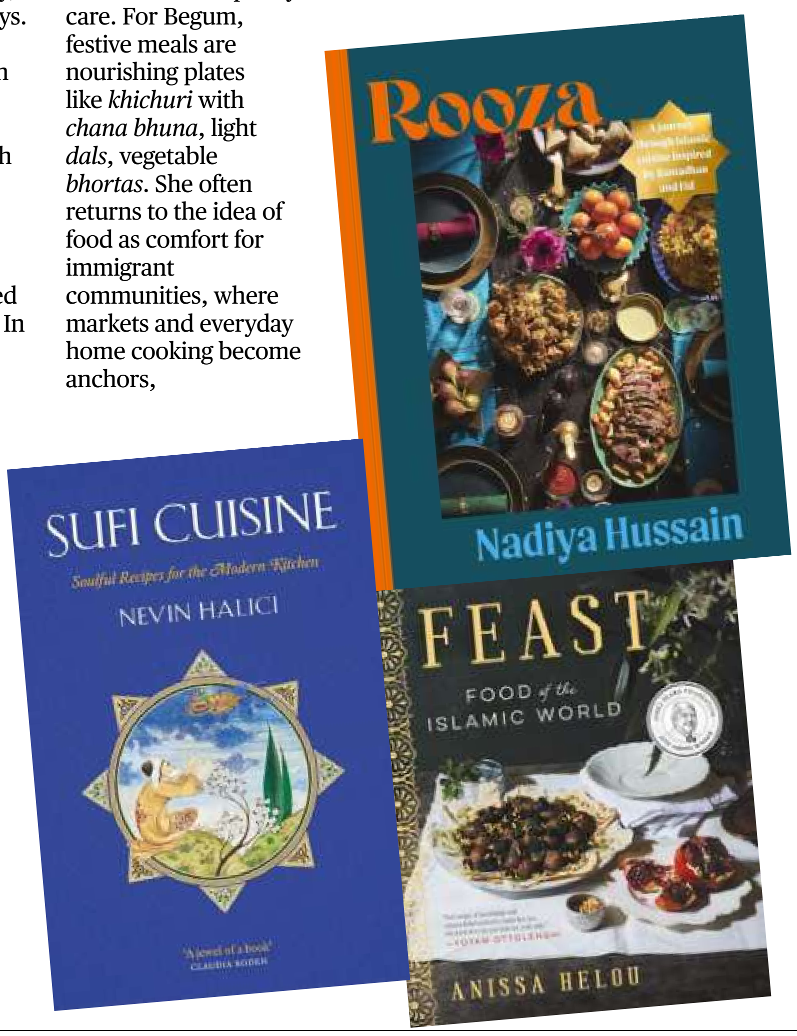
Books like Yasmin Khan's *Zaitoun: Recipes and Stories from the Palestinian Kitchen* remind us that Ramzan food is also about endurance. Olive oil, lentils, flatbreads and citrus anchor recipes to land, season and survival.

In India, Muslim culinary history has long been preserved through scholarship and home kitchens. Salma Husain's *Alwan-e-Nemat: A Journey Through Jahangir's Kitchen* opens a window into Mughal court cuisine through a 16th century manuscript. While the recipes speak of royal tables, Husain situates them within broader histories of Persian influence, technique and taste that continue to shape Ramzan cooking in North Indian homes.

From Kashmir, Maryam H. Reshii documents ceremonial and everyday Muslim food shaped by season, geography and collective labour, while chef and writer Sadaf Hussain chronicles Awadhi cuisine with a practitioner's eye. His slow-cooked *qormas*, breads and lentil dishes reflect the discipline of fasting as meals that balance rather than offer spectacle. Further south, *Ravuthar Recipes: With a Pinch of Love* by Hazeena Seyad evokes Ramzan feasting with abandon and joy from Tamil Nadu.

Food becomes a moral language during Ramzan. It is also a season of stories shared over warm bread and passed bowls, and in the company of these books that show us the table as a place of memory, restraint and gratitude.

The writer is the author of Temple Tales *and translator of* Hungry Humans.



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

The politics of love

A provocative anthology challenging traditional ideas of romance through Dalit-feminist narratives

Chintan Girish Modi

What does it mean to 'love' amidst the constraints and contours of caste? How do we learn to read afresh the Brahmanical scripts of marriage, kinship, desire and gender, through an emphasis on Dalit subjectivity? What is at stake in the radical (re)formulation of Dalits as passionate subjects in the time of caste? Nikhil Pandhi, cultural anthropologist, queer feminist researcher and anti-caste literary translator, asks these questions in the introduction to his excellent new collection of short stories titled *Love in the Time of Caste*.

It is an unusual but engrossing pick for Valentine's Day, which often comes across as more of a capitalist scam than a genuine celebration of affection and intimacy between people who choose each other over the norms laid down to police their minds and bodies.

This "Dalit-feminist anthology" features the work of 17 writers, including Kusum Meghwal, Rajni Tilak and Kailash Wankhede. Pandhi is not only the editor of this anthology, but has also translated all the stories from Hindi to English. He has also written a sharp and moving introductory essay that explains his curatorial process, and situates the stories in a social, historical, political and literary context.

Calling out misogyny

"Babasaheb Ambedkar always stood for love marriages, even inter-caste ones. Whether Chamar, Chuhra, Teli, Pasi, or Brahman – if a boy and a girl love each other, what is the problem?" These words, which appear in Poonam Tushamad's gooseflesh-inducing story 'The Chronicle of Kali', are uttered by a Chamar man whose son Sonu is in love with a Chuhra girl named Kali. While Kali wants to marry Sonu, her brother Balwan is vehemently opposed to the match. Balwan slaps his sister's potential father-in-law, and hurls a stone slab at Sonu's head. Despite this humiliation, Sonu's father refuses to respond with violence. All he wants is an unconditional public apology.

Anthropologist and researcher Nikhil Pandhi, who has translated and edited *Love in the Time of Caste*.

What is amply clear through this story is that Ambedkar is a living presence guiding everyday life choices, and not an ideologue fossilised in speeches and inscriptions. Here is a powerful alternative to the tyranny of elders who expect their sons and daughters to marry not for love but to consolidate wealth, uphold warped notions of honour, and continue the bloodline.

Anita Bharti's story 'Blue Mountain, Red Sun' offers a radical vision of what an anti-caste wedding can look like. Her protagonists, Pragya and Samar, warm up to each other during a protest rally in solidarity with factory workers laid off by a motorcycle manufacturing company. Their wedding at the Union office has "no rituals, no priest, no formal vows" but comrades singing revolutionary verses from poets Pash, Muktibodh and Dhumil.

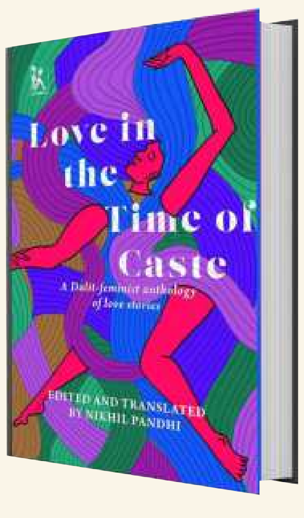
Those who believe that activists are in the business of destroying the status quo but lack the imagination or tools to build anew will be forced to reconsider their view after engaging with this firecracker of a story. While the author casts their decision to prioritise "ideological kinship" over "biological ties", she does not pretend that an anti-caste marriage is without complications.

Samar is held accountable for the patriarchal expectations that he begins to pile on Pragya after they get married. Unwilling to be docile and indulgent, she speaks out in defiance: "I was always an activist – you used to admire that about me! What has suddenly changed now?" Misogyny is called out here, even when it is practised by men who are oppressed by the caste system.

Unruly and emancipatory

The critical gaze of this anthology is also vigilant about situations where women become cheerleaders for aggression and revenge. In Raj Valmiki's story 'Masculinity', when Thakur Gajendra Pratap spouts "vulgar innuendos" at Rajni, who is in love with a boy called Rajan from the Bhangi community, Rajan withholds his rage and resolves not to get into a fight. Rajni spits at Rajan, equating his silence with cowardice. She tells him, "A man as spineless as you does not deserve to be my partner!" Terrified of being viewed as a "sissy", Rajan beats up the Thakur boy.

Each story is worth reading not only for its political import but also its literary merit. As a collection that unravels how emancipatory and unruly love can be, this book deserves to be read widely and not relegated to tokenistic discussions on Dalit writing at literature festivals.

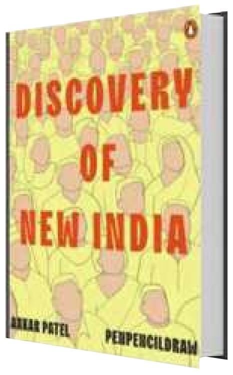


Love in the Time of Caste
Ed and trs Nikhil Pandhi
Zubaan
₹695

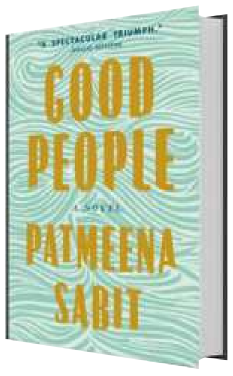
The reviewer is a writer, educator and literary critic. His work has appeared in anthologies, including Fearless Love (2019) *and* Bent Book (2020).

BROWSER

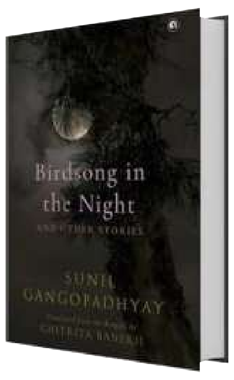
Discovery of New India
Aakar Patel & PenPencilDraw
Penguin
₹799
Dedicating the book to jailed student activist Umar Khalid and other political prisoners, Patel attempts to shine a light on the layered realities of modern India in graphic novel format. The illustrator is an anonymous political satirist.



Good People
Patmeena Sabit
Virago
₹662 (ebook)
Khaled Hosseini, author of the 2003 bestseller *The Kite Runner*, calls this debut work "the Afghan novel I have been eagerly waiting for". The story of a family that flees to America during the Russian invasion of 1979, it has several parallels with Sabit's own life and experiences.



Birdsong in the Night
Sunil Gangopadhyay, trs Chitrita Banerji
Aleph
₹799
This compilation of short stories by the renowned Bengali author is a wide-ranging commentary of society, from corrupt politics to the inner lives of women. This is food and culture historian Banerji's second translation for Gangopadhyay, after the Partition novel *Arjun* in 1987.



Parashuram: Vol. 1 & 2
Arnav Anand, illus. Mona Singh
HarperCollins
₹699 (each)
The author reimagines the story of the mythological warrior-sage in graphic novel format. Volume 1 won the Best Comics/Graphic Novel award at FICCI Best Animated Frames Awards 2025. Singh, known by her pen name Monami, is a self-taught illustrator based in Delhi.

People waiting to cast their votes during the 2025 Bihar Assembly elections in Patna. (GETTY IMAGES)

IN CONVERSATION

A METAMORPHOSIS

Nation-states are past their democratic peak and changing into something new, argues Rana Dasgupta in his new book

G. Sampath
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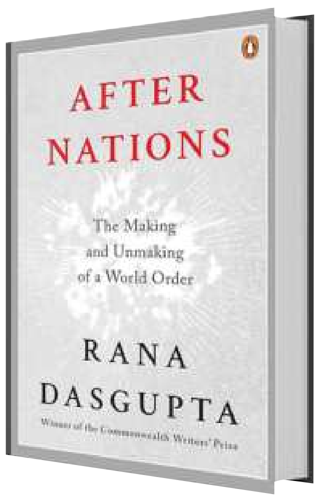
More than 99% of humanity lives in nation-states. But nations are less than 200 years old, and today many countries are sliding into xenophobia, debt and a cost of living crisis. With the liberal ideas that underpinned the nation-state system – human rights, dignity, security for all – in retreat, millions are feeling abandoned by the nation-state, and turning to cross-border migration in desperation.



At the same time, nation-states are proving ill-equipped to handle urgent planetary threats such as climate change and ecological collapse. Is the nation-state system in decline? Will it be, or can it be, replaced by a new system?

Novelist and essayist Rana Dasgupta explores these themes in *After Nations: The Making and Unmaking of a World Order* (India Allen Lane), a fascinating historical and political analysis of the nation-state. In this interview, he discusses his book and what a 'post-nation' future might look like. Edited excerpts:

Question: *You began as a novelist, switched to reported nonfiction, and your new book is a world historical analysis of the nation-state. What prompted this transition?*

Answer: All of my work is in some way about forms of community that are not the nation. In my first book, *Tokyo Cancelled*, a lot of travellers were stuck together in an airport, and they started telling stories. The idea of being in an airport is that they're not in any national space, particularly. It was my attempt to create an image of what a global culture – of storytelling, of cosmopolitanism – might look like. So, some of my intellectual concerns have remained constant. But as a writer, you're constantly looking for new ways to tell the story you want to tell. And as I've gotten older, or as the world has become more strange, I've felt the need to speak to the reader directly, rather than to invent stories about this.

Q: *You've lived in four different countries – India, the U.S., the U.K., and France. Did this experience impact how you approached this project?*

A: It did. As I was moving around between these countries, it was interesting how similar the conversations were in all of them. The old school liberals were panicking that the state was falling apart, that it was being overtaken by barbarians, values were collapsing, institutions were collapsing, and the news media was collapsing. Each of these countries seemed to think it was their own private problem, especially Britain, because Brexit was such a shock to people. But I felt that it's not a national problem. Maybe it's not that Britain has done something or France has done something, but that we are at a particular moment in the life cycle of the nation-state where it is changing into something new.

In each of these countries, we're confronting a different style of politics, a different set of motivations for politicians. What could be linking these different countries? What would it mean if we looked at the nation-state system as a single object rather than a bunch of discrete nations? What if the nation-state system is something with its own agendas, independently of what national electorates want? This book was my attempt to answer these questions.

Q: *The nation-state is in crisis, but nationalisms are doing very well, no matter where you look. How do we understand this contradiction?*

A: If we say the nation-state is in crisis, we should be a little clear what we mean because nation-states, at a structural level, are the political apparatus of the capitalist system. So they're not going anywhere because the capitalist system is not going anywhere. But they are ceasing to deliver some of the services and the political goods that they used to in the past. Most of the rich countries have got over their democratic peak. They're past the moment at which the alignment of the interests of the state and the interests of the population was at its greatest. Those interests are now diverging. So we see conflicts between populations and states that are much more intense than even 10 years ago.

Q: *You speak of China as a prototype of post-national governance. But China is also driving the extraction of natural resources on a scale and at a pace we have never seen before. So, is China a model for the future or is it more like a warning for the future?*

A: China is unique. It's not like every rising power will be China, because China has the 'software' from learned political evolution over long periods of time to run transnational systems like it does today. There's only room for one China in the world. The risks that America thinks lie in China are not necessarily the risks, let's say, of Germany in the 1930s. America is constantly obsessed with the Second World War as the sort of myth of origin. Everything is World War III, everything is Hitler again. Just as when Britain was declining, there was this bad Germany. Now America's declining, so there is going to be this warlike China. No. The real threat is not what is happening in the South China Sea, where China is doing what all great powers do, and what America and Russia have done. The real risks of China are political and ecological devastation, and we've seen ecological breakdown as a consistent feature of Chinese history because it is such an extractive power.

Read the full interview on magazine.thehindu.com

Scan the QR code to listen to Rana Dasgupta in conversation on thehindu.com

Grave forays

Mariana Enriquez takes readers along on personal tours of 21 cemeteries

Visitors at Highgate Cemetery in London. (GETTY IMAGES)

Anushree Nande

Mariana Enriquez wasn't always a taphophile (someone who tours cemeteries for pleasure), though she prefers the term "cemetery connoisseur". Her love for them began at the Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno in 1997, during a Europe tour with her mother. Genoa wasn't even one of the cities she was looking forward to, but once it was added to the itinerary, the famed cemetery became a "brooding obsession".

In her debut non-fiction collection, *Somebody's Walking On Your Grave: My Cemetery Journeys,* translated by Megan McDowell, Enriquez takes us along on personal tours of 21 cemeteries. Cemeteries provide no dearth of stories and personalities – big and small, horrific and mundane, salacious and serene, haunted and mysterious, personal and communal – and these essays showcase a sweeping breadth of this range.

Crooked crosses

There are interesting tidbits about the Welsh colonies in the Andes and Argentine Patagonia, one of which includes a famous horse with his own burial place (Malacara, literally Long Face, saved his rider, a John Daniel Evans, whose family would end up being key to Argentina retaining Patagonia, and not conceding it to Chile). She writes about how a group of soldiers from Guernsey ended up buried on Mount Urgull in Basque Country's San Sebastian.

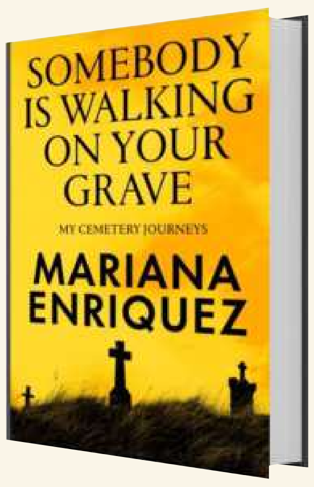
In western Australia's Rottnest Island, she makes a poignant visit to a place once inhabited by the Noongar Aboriginal people, later used as a prison for captive natives, including children, and now home to one of the country's largest indigenous burial grounds. At Martin Garcia Island Cemetery in Argentina's Buenos Aires province, many of the crosses are crooked. A reason given is a defective mould, but there are crosses from the same period without the slant, so what does this mean about the graves they mark?

Walking over the dead

There are visits to Savannah, Georgia, where she realises that since all cemeteries were nomadic in the 19th century, we're always walking over the dead; and to Louisiana's New Orleans, which houses 42 cemeteries featuring niches, vaults, and mausoleums. There are no burials here, bar the cemetery for the indigent, poorest citizens of the city, because the city is built on swampy ground.

Trips to popular cemeteries like Highgate in London, Edinburgh's Greyfriars Kirkyard, and the Montparnasse Cemetery and Catacombs in Paris (where Enriquez controversially steals a bone as a souvenir!) nudge shoulders with the Old Jewish Cemetery and the Vysehrad Cemetery in Prague.

These essays, organised somewhat but not always thematically, jump between continents and decades, sometimes lingering at length, other times flitting through in short bursts. This makes for a varied reading experience, almost like choosing candy from a pick-and-mix bag you've been handed by someone else. You love a few, others are enjoyable enough, others yet aren't to your taste – there's something for everyone, even if you're not a fan of the macabre or hauntology.



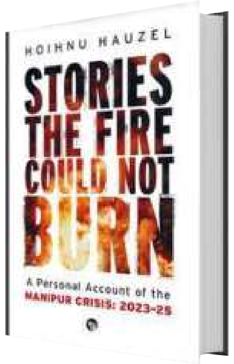
Somebody's Walking On Your Grave: My Cemetery Journeys
Mariana Enriquez, trs. Megan McDowell
Granta Books
₹1,801 (Kindle)

A lot of this wide-reaching appeal is down to how Enriquez blends reportage, memoir, travelogue, culture, literature, architecture, art, politics, and music. The references can often be niche, but the author's enthusiasm makes up for the gap in the reader's knowledge – a depth that goes beyond the aesthetic appeal of the gothic and uses each cemetery as a lens to investigate history, to interrogate death, and to learn about life.

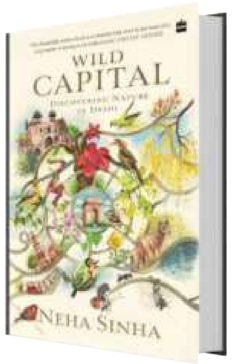
Enriquez recently told NPR that she grew up in the 1970s, at a time when Argentina's dictatorship made many bodies disappear, often buried in some common, untraceable grave. So, she realised that a tombstone, a final resting place, is comforting in a good way. "Where the name and the date remain, a voice that says: I was here, now I'm gone. Maybe no one knows my name any more, but someday someone will remember me."

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based author and editor.

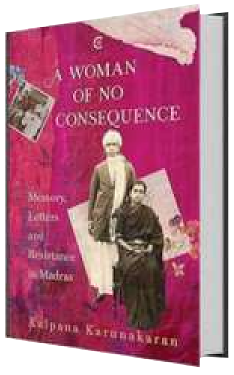
Stories the Fire Could Not Burn
Hoihnu Hauzel
Speaking Tiger Books
₹499
Manipur may have a new government, but the Kuki Deputy CM, Nemcha Kipgen, had to take oath virtually for security reasons. A journalist and writer traces the fault-lines between the majority Meiteis and the tribal Kuki-Zo communities.



Wild Capital: Discovering Nature in Delhi
Neha Sinha
HarperCollins
₹799
Great cities, says the nature writer, are indistinguishable from their natural histories. Her new book uncovers Delhi, as she goes through mines, the slopes of the Aravalli hills, ramparts of forts, and forests to find out how wilderness thrives amid myriad challenges.



A Woman of No Consequence
Kalpana Karunakaran
Context
₹599
Her grandmother left her a treasure trove with the words, "Writings for Kalpana." This led Karunakaran to write about her extraordinary grandmother, Pankajam, and the social milieu that helped her mother, writer and left activist Mythily Sivaraman, to come into her own.



Flora Indica: Recovering Lost Stories From Kew's Indian Drawings
Henry Noltie
Roli Books
₹2,495
This is a selection from Kew's collection of Indian botanical art with stories of the artists who painted them, the colonial backdrop, and their role in the development of botanical knowledge. In all, 20 Indian artists are featured, showcasing over 100 watercolours.

INSIDE THE DRIVERLESS AGE

Look East

In China, autonomous and semi-autonomous technology has already reached scale. Data from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology shows that advanced driver assist systems were present in about 62.6% of new passenger cars sold in the first half of 2025.

(Clockwise from left) Autonomous vehicles; and part of the Austin skyline. (NITIN CHAUDHARY)

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Beyond Austin

While in Austin, I spot a few Zoox cars, which are Toyota Highlanders retrofitted with radars and cameras, each with a safety driver, just like Tesla's AVs. Founded in 2014, Zoox was acquired by Amazon in 2020, bringing yet another tech giant into the self-driving race.

Legacy automakers across the world have been quietly building their own paths to autonomy. Mercedes-Benz, for instance, is rolling out autonomous driving in the U.S. this year, using Nvidia Drive AV, an AI software, allowing drivers to take their eyes off the road under specific conditions. Nissan has been testing autonomous mobility services in Japan, while Baidu already operates large scale robotaxi fleets across multiple Chinese cities.

The technology remains expensive, with the sensor and computing stack on each vehicle estimated to cost about $100,000 over the car's base price. Still, there is a growing sense in the U.S. that it is now in a race as China's AV sector is outpacing competitors in deployment speed.

As an Indian in America, I find myself thinking about the many Indians shaping this industry from within the U.S. Ashok Elluswamy, vice-president of Tesla's AI software, has come under online scrutiny for arguing that the "obvious" solution to Tesla's long-running self-driving challenges lies in its camera-only approach, dismissing the need for additional sensors such as LiDAR. At Uber, another Indian, Balaji Krishnamurthy, has stepped in as chief financial officer, taking over from Prashanth Mahendra Rajah, at a moment when robotaxi investments are moving from experimentation to execution.

"Zoox is taking different approaches in different cities," Michael, the Tesla employee, tells me. "In Austin, it's retrofitting vehicles and is still in testing mode. But if you want to see the full promise of Zoox, go to Las Vegas."

I am intrigued enough to do that.

Zoox began testing retrofitted vehicles near its Las Vegas headquarters in 2019. It took a bold new route in 2023 by launching futuristic, purpose-built robotaxis. Last year, it officially launched its public robotaxi service. It currently operates on limited stretches of the Strip, offering a controlled environment with predictable traffic. Rides are free for now, with Zoox offering the service at no cost while it gathers real-world feedback and awaits approval to begin charging passengers.

At one of five pickup spots where Zoox cars can be hailed, I wait. Soon, a minivan-shaped vehicle rolls up. It drives bi-directionally, meaning it has no front or rear. Its sliding doors, designed to minimise the risk of hitting nearby objects, opens to reveal a four-seater layout.

After I'm seated, the car doesn't budge. It keeps reminding me to fasten my seatbelt, though I already have done so. Then, a human voice comes through a speaker on the roof. "I suggest you remove the bag from the seat. It's interfering with our sensors," the voice says. I do so, and the car starts to move.

"Do you monitor what happens inside the car?" I ask.

"No, not always. Only when there's an issue," the faceless voice says.

This realisation is discomfiting. To function, these AVs need a view of the streets, sidewalks, and the people moving through them. It is, in effect, a kind of god's-eye vision. Always on, always watching. These cars are also recording and retaining visual and location data. How long that data lives, who controls it, and under what circumstances it can be accessed and by whom remains murky. Without clear guardrails, these AVs risk becoming mobile surveillance systems.

The Zoox car starts to move gently. No hiccups, no jolts. Unlike the retrofitted cars, it has no steering wheel or pedals, just the smooth confidence of a system built from scratch. Zoox completes a five-mile loop and brings me back to where I started.

In the long run

In Vegas, another vision of the future is unfolding 40 feet below ground. The Vegas Loop, a network of narrow tunnels (roughly 12 feet wide) dug by Musk's Boring Company, now shuttles passengers between stations in Tesla vehicles. At one Loop station, accessed via an elevator, I watch a neat line of Teslas picking up passengers and shooting off into the tunnels.

Rodrigo comes to pick me up in his Tesla Model S. He eagerly explains to me Musk's vision: the Boring Company would build the infrastructure, and Tesla taxis would run through it. "The long-term plan," the taxi driver says, "is to transition the Vegas Loop to fully autonomous Tesla robotaxis. We won't need human drivers then."

"What about your job, and those of other drivers?" I wonder aloud.

Rodrigo shrugs. It is a shrug of uneasy acceptance. The silence that follows lasts less than a minute; my stop arrives under 10 minutes and costs less than $5, a trip that would have otherwise taken 30 minutes in surface traffic.

I emerge from the tunnel into the chaos of Vegas. My journey is coming to an end. Despite all the warnings and fears of jobs being lost, I feel strangely optimistic. It is a future that holds the promise of a frictionless-commute world. As Stellantis employee Chaudhary put it earlier, the question is no longer which technology is superior, but who will master and scale their chosen path first.

Safety first

India remains at an early stage. The country's autonomous vehicle market is projected to grow to about $11.37 billion by 2030, according to Grand View Research. Much of this growth reflects the broader AV ecosystem. Progress is most visible in the spread of semi-autonomous safety features, with models from Mahindra and Tata offering tech such as adaptive cruise control.

The writer is a U.S.-based professional with an interest in travel and culture reporting.

(Clockwise from below) Siddi weavers at *Threads of Confluence* in DakshinaChitra museum; art historian Anitha N. Reddy; and the kavand quilts made by the Siddi women. (B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM)

MADRAS CHECKS MEETS AFRICAN MEMORY

The Siddi women's *kavand* quilt travelling exhibition is a chequered story of migration — of Africans to India and an Indian fabric to Africa

Sanjana Ganesh
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Hanaphabi and Saidambi Naik, two middle-aged women from the Kalaghatgi *taluk* in Karnataka's Dharwad district, are restless at first to speak in front of a camera. A few whisper-filled moments later, Saidambi takes the lead in telling their story of stitching memory.

"We are both from the Siddi community in north Karnataka but our origins are in Sindh, Pakistan and parts of Africa. We have left our village to come to Chennai to show our *kavands* (quilts)," Saidambi says in the Siddi dialect, which has a mix of words borrowed from Konkani, Marathi, Kannada, Urdu and Hindi.

Bearing distinctly African features, the Siddis, historically poor and discriminated against, with only some assigned the Scheduled Tribe status, have struggled to build a life outside of their economic constraints. The two women rarely get a chance to leave their village because the community tends to distrust outsiders. "We sometimes travel to our relatives' houses close to our villages but otherwise, we just work in the fields and stitch the quilts," says Hanaphabi.

Since 2015-16, as their quilts started to be recognised for the craftsmanship, Siddi women have been slowly venturing outside their villages to showcase them. Leading the way is art historian and community practitioner Anitha N. Reddy, who has been working with the community, across 15-20 villages. Reddy first saw a *kavand* at a friend's home in the Western Ghats, 15 years ago. "During a trip to a Siddi village, I had given away a bunch of my clothes to my friend's family. The next time I arrived, I was admiring a quilt that my friend's wife had stitched. She pointed to the blanket, showing me scraps of my clothes, which had made it to the piece. It was amusing but also captivating," she says.

That set Reddy on a journey of understanding the quilt. Elaborating on the significance of the *kavand*, Saidambi says, "The most ornate quilts are reserved for marriages. It is an heirloom passed on to our daughters. If you do not take a quilt to your in-laws' house, you might not be treated well. You will also not have a sheet to cover yourself with in the winter. We also make quilts for our newborns." No two *kavands* ever look the same. One can find Roman letters like 'A', 'E' and 'H' as a part of the mix. "To the Siddis, it is merely a design," says Reddy. What was once a tool for survival is now an art, and a potential livelihood.

In December, the duo, along with 20 others, came to Chennai's DakshinaChitra museum to display 55 colourful, tiled quilts as a part of *Threads of Confluence*, a travelling exhibit by Reddy in collaboration with the Siddi practitioners. Reddy and interdisciplinary visual and performance art practitioner Malavika P.C. held workshops to help these women visualise new quilt designs.

Merging two worlds

For the first time, the Siddi women have made use of Madras Checks in their hand-stitched *kavands,* the former a distinct cloth from the erstwhile Madras Presidency that has been exported since the 16th century.

Bringing the *kavand* and Madras Checks together is a collaborative effort between Reddy and Anitha Pottamkulam, director (culture), DakshinaChitra, who roped in Old Madras Trading Company (OMTC).

Although Madras Checks and the Siddis do not overlap in history, there's a metaphorical connection. If the Siddis were brought to India from Africa, the Madras Checks travelled to the Caribbean via colonial trade. Now a premium fabric, this peasant/fisherman clothing from 12th century Madraspatnam village (later Madras/Chennai) became popular in 1960s America.

"When Anitha [Pottamkulam] and I spoke about this exhibit coming to Chennai, we realised that we'd like to incorporate an element from the city. The vibrant Madras Checks was our cloth of choice. It has a long history of export from South India to many parts of the world, and is especially viewed as a symbol of prestige in the African nations," says Reddy.

What is a kavand?

Traditionally, *kavands* are made from scrap cloth. Each quilt is built tile by tile, with multicoloured fabric. The oldest, most worn-out piece of cloth finds a place at the very base of this handicraft. The practice of sewing *kavands* is influenced by generations of nomadic women (Jogis, Kilikayathas and Gaundaligas) and settled communities (Maratha, Lingayat, Siddi, Gowli, among others) across Karnataka. *Kavand* distinguishes the north Karnataka Siddis from those in Gujarat.

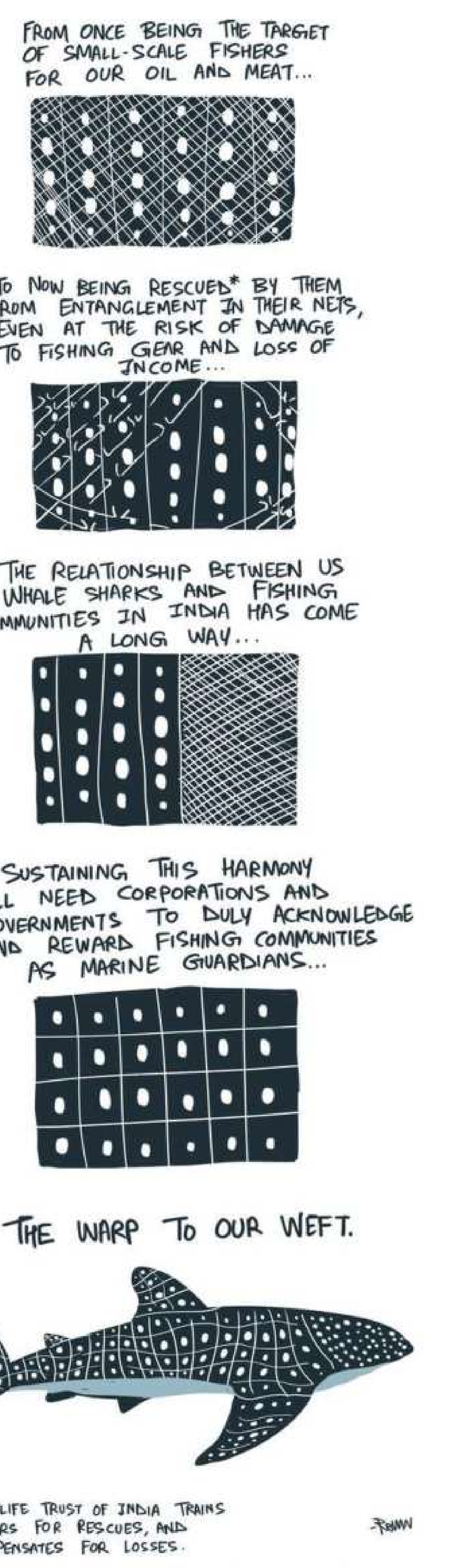
Rising from scraps

While OMTC co-founder Ranvir Shah, who owns the 55 *kavand* quilts made using Madras Checks, is selling and exhibiting these products, Reddy is separately doing other shows with the Siddi quilters. She says, "Some of the women have travelled in India to similar exhibits, and they teach other art practitioners their quilting style. It has made them value themselves more." Currently, they are exhibiting at Kadari Art Gallery, Telangana, till February 19.

Despite the fact that many of them are earning through the craft, Hanaphabi and Saidambi are "not sure how this is going to solve their bigger problems" of excessive rains, flooding, and landslides uprooting their homes and lives. A lesson from these women is their resilience as they find joy in learning the art of stitching.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



In the age of algorithms and loneliness, two initiatives are reimagining love and community for the disabled and senior citizens

ACCESSIBILITY IN MODERN ROMANCE

Fareeda Kanga

When Mumbai-based Khushi Ganatra, 35, turned to dating apps to look for a life partner, or even a companion, she had no luck. "No one wants to talk to me once I state that I am a wheelchair user," she says. Born with spina bifida, Ganatra's experience reflects the quiet exclusion faced by many persons with disabilities (PWDs) seeking intimacy and belonging.

On Valentine's Day, when the idea of companionship is widely feted, for PWDs, forming romantic and social connections often remains far more complex. "It doesn't even strike my own family that I have desires and dream of marriage," says Ganatra.

Many PWDs face insurmountable barriers when navigating mainstream dating and social networking platforms. The challenges range from poor accessibility and lack of inclusive design to social stigma and rejection based solely on disability.

According to WHO/UN estimates, globally more than 16% of the population lives with a significant disability, indicating the number of Indians with disabilities could be over 200 million (more than 10 crore). And Cupid can be cruel.

Finding connections

It took two Mumbai-based women, mothers of neurodivergent boys, to plug this gap and offer a ray of hope for this section of society.

"My 21-year-old son Mihaan has Down Syndrome and though he studied in a mainstream school, as he approached his teens, I realised that all his friends were going to move on to college and their paths would cease to cross. He needed a new companion and I hunted for a platform where he could meet other young people like himself, but did not find any," says Moneisha Gandhi, 54.

A chance introduction to another 21-year-old, Vir, who has autism, proved to be life-changing for Mihaan. Both boys hit it off instantly.

And that inspired Gandhi and Vir's mother, Gopika Kapoor, to launch Buddy Up Network (BUN), an inclusive social networking app, in 2024. It allows users to search for friends based on their location, interests, age, gender and disability.

"While there are several good services for PWDs, a platform for making social connections was missing," says Kapoor, 51. "Many PWDs feel isolated and lonely as they don't have the same kind of social opportunities as non-disabled people. Mihaan and Vir were lucky to find each other and their friendship made us realise how powerful such a connection can be for one's sense of wellbeing."

Once the app was launched, the founders realised that people were not just looking for friendship, but also for love, companionship and life partners. Now, users can indicate on their profile the kind of relationship they are seeking. With an average of 150 daily active users, most in the 20-30 age bracket, BUN is slowly gaining traction, say the founders.

Take, for instance, 23-year-old Bhruguraj Rathod from Gandhinagar in Gujarat. After discovering the app through a friend, he is hoping to find a life partner. But in the meantime, he has forged many friendships online with other visually impaired users like him.

"Women on regular dating apps just block me, but here I have found a family," Rathod says cheerfully. He often chats about movies and music with his new pals, and adds that the app is safe and easy to use with a screen reader.

"We are not your typical dating app," says Gandhi. "No swiping, etc. We are just a community space for people with disabilities to gather and make connections, both platonic and romantic as per their needs." A total of 5,547 connections have been made on the app so far.

Judgment-free spaces

For India's rapidly growing senior population, love increasingly takes gentler, broader forms – companionship, emotional safety, shared purpose, and being truly seen.

Loneliness among older people is frequently misunderstood. It isn't always about living alone. Many senior citizens experience loneliness even within families or marriages, when they feel unheard or invisible. According to the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India, 13%-14% of seniors report frequent loneliness, while other studies show that emotional isolation can affect mental health, especially among women and those with limited social networks.

This is the space that Marzi, a Bengaluru-based community platform for 55+ users, is addressing – not by matching people romantically, but by helping them build meaningful connections through shared interests, life stages, and experiences.

"After moving to Bengaluru, I found it difficult to find like-minded people. I had a thriving social circle in Mumbai. It was my children who came across Marzi and encouraged me to check it out. Since then, I have attended multiple events and have found my own little circle. People who are just like me, and people who like the same stuff as I do," says 60-something Anjali Kochar.

With over 30,000 members across 40 cities, Marzi facilitates interest-based meetups, curated travel, social clubs, preventive health programmes, and concierge-style services for active seniors.

In Bengaluru alone, more than 15 meetups take place each month – ranging from hobby groups and wellness circles to life-stage conversations – creating safe, judgment-free spaces for older adults to express themselves and form bonds. These initiatives help these seniors move from passive participation to active contribution.

"The antidote to loneliness isn't numbers – it's depth," says Vibha Singal, co-founder of Marzi. "People don't need dozens of connections, they need a few relationships where they feel emotionally safe, valued, and heard. Marzi exists to enable exactly that."

Some Marzi users have formed stronger bonds that have blossomed beyond being solely platonic, proving that shared interests and commonalities can be a great way to find a companion.

As India's senior numbers are projected to reach nearly one-fifth of the total population by 2050, initiatives that nurture emotional inclusion are becoming essential. And platforms like Marzi and BUN remind us that love doesn't fade with age or disability – it simply evolves. Sometimes, love looks like a shared laugh on a morning walk, a circle that listens, or a community that finally feels like home.

The writer is based in Mumbai.

(Clockwise from below) A meet-up by Marzi in Bengaluru; Moneisha Gandhi and Gopika Kapoor, founders of BUN; and Khushi Ganatra, BUN user and disability activist. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Pioneering efforts

Inclove, among the first inclusive matchmaking apps, founded in 2014 by Kalyani Khona and Shankar Srinivasan, was also launched with a similar ethos like BUN. To eliminate social barriers and provide a forum for differently able people to find partners. However, the app shut down in 2019 as the team faced "challenges in scaling and monetisation, plus it was hard to reach out to this audience", says Khona. Despite these limitations, it wasn't an exercise in futility, as out of 10,000 matches made on Inclove, almost 8% converted into marriage, and many of them have children too, adds Khona.

Visitors at *The Hindu* Lit for Life in Chennai last month.
(B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM)

POP-A-RAZZI

Shrinking space for books

As book supplements are dropped, literary festivals feel like the last sanctuaries for readers

The Washington Post's book review section is now twice-dead. In 2009, the newspaper's *Book World* supplement was lopped off to cut costs. In 2022, the *Post* relaunched *Book World*. But it did not survive the latest bloodbath where the newspaper axed 300 jobs on February 4.

Book reviews are struggling the world over. And it's a vicious circle, writes poet and critic Adam Kirsch in *The Atlantic*. Not enough people want to read book reviews. So publications cut book coverage which means readers do not hear about new books. "As a result they buy fewer books, which makes publications think they are not worth covering," says Kirsch.

Attending a literary festival in India, it might not feel that way. I have seen people standing in a snaking line in the rain to get their books signed by author Amitav Ghosh. At the Jaipur Literature Festival, the crowds were so overwhelming on the weekend, I thought I might get trampled. When Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri shared a stage for the first time ever at the Kolkata Literary Meet, I couldn't find a seat.

But there's still a sinking feeling even as we drink the free wine at the afterparty. The news about *The Washington Post* came as I was attending yet another literary festival in India. As I talked about my own new book, it felt a bit like Nero playing the fiddle while Rome burnt. It was as if the literary festivals were the last sanctuaries sheltering an endangered breed – people who love books.

Passing traditions

Even as the Kolkata Book Fair boasts record footfall (32 lakh) and record sales (₹27 crore) this year, we keep hearing the same refrain – no one reads anymore. The sales figures do not tell us what kind of books are being sold. Are they novels? Or self-help books? Or coaching manuals? But one thing is clear: all is not well in the world of books.

A first-time writer visiting India complained about how hard it was to get any traction for her book. In the shrinking world of book reviews, it is hard to get a foothold unless you are already a name. But until you get that foothold, you cannot become a name. That vicious circle again. She had travelled all the way to India, excited to promote her book but struggled to even get the word out. Her publicist was busy with other bigger names on their roster. The irony is she needs the publicity more than they do. They are already famous.

But that's just the business of marketing books. What is a more bitter pill to swallow is to wonder if we are living in a world that's slowly falling out of love with books. Or perhaps it does not need them the way we once did. Growing up in Kolkata, books let me imagine the sunlit islands of Corfu, the moors of England and the magical hills in San Francisco, places I had no hope of visiting at the time.

Books were our rite of passage. We all went through the Ayn Rand phase, secretly read the dirty bits in Harold Robbins and pitted our brains against Satyajit Ray's detective Felu-da. During summer holidays, I curled up in bed every afternoon with a book, trying to read more slowly, hoping to make the book last longer. When I won some prize at school, I was allowed to select the book I wanted. I spent forever trying to choose, then opted for the fattest book, to get the most bang for my buck. (Sadly, it was a rather dull book and I don't think I finished it.)

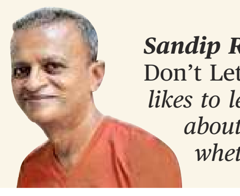
Age of decline?

In a world of smartphones, we have plenty of other attractions competing for our attention. We don't read less. We just read fewer books. Even I do and as a writer, that feels shameful.

But just as I was despairing about being a writer in this age of decline of books, I stumbled upon the Instagram account of a woman in a small town in Bengal. Like many Instagrammers, Pujarini Pradhan (@lifeofpujaa) chronicles her daily life – cooking on a clay stove, chopping vegetables on a curved *bonti*, washing clothes three times a day. And she speaks in English so that her small-town neighbours don't know what she is talking about. She says no one can shame her about her accent either. In a state where culture remains Kolkata-centric, she is a breath of fresh air. And she talks about books.

I watch her talking about Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. "It broke my heart into pieces," she says. But my attention is elsewhere. Behind her, stacked on the floor, are towers of books, perhaps some 200 books, books that transport her far away from Midnapore.

Books still matter in the life of Pujaa. And in mine.



***Sandip Roy**, author of Don't Let Him Know, likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.*

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

CREATION, IN MANY TONGUES

In some Brahmanical myths, the world is made for the sake of sacrifice. In tribal myths, it is created for relationships

When we think of creation myths in our country, we usually jump to the big Sanskrit stories: Brahma sitting on a lotus, Vishnu sleeping on the serpent, Shiva dancing the cosmos into being. But India is not just *Vedas* and *Puranas*. India is also Bhil, Gond, Santhal, Khasi, Banjara, Dhangar, Koli, Toda, Rabari, Munda, Nicobarese, and Lepcha. Each of these communities has its own memory of how the world began.

For Bhils of western India, the world began when their deity Babo Pithora dived into the primordial ocean and brought up mud. From this mud came earth. Babo and Rani Kajal decorated the earth like a painted wall, filling it with colour and life. To this day, Bhil homes carry *pithora* paintings – ritual murals that recreate that first moment of creation. Creation, here, is art. God is a painter.

The Gonds say that Bhagavan, the great creator, sent an earthworm to bring up mud from beneath the waters. Then came Lingo, the first bard, who sang the world into culture. In this myth, creation is not complete until someone sings. Music and ritual finish what mud and water begin. It is a reminder that civilisation is not just built but also performed.

Of family, loss, livelihood

The Santhals of Jharkhand speak of Thakur Jiu, who placed the first couple, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, on a hilltop when the world was still water and sky. A goose brought up mud, land formed, and the couple's many children populated the earth. The Santhal myth is intimate, domestic, with a clear ancestral tree. It is less about gods and more about parents and children – a family story.

The Khasis of Meghalaya imagine that once all humans lived in heaven, descending to earth by a cosmic tree. But one day, the tree was cut down. The path to heaven was lost forever. The myth explains not only how the world was made, but why we feel separated from the divine. Creation is not just a beginning – it is a loss.

The Banjaras tell of Sevalal Maharaj, who asked for land when the world was covered with water. A fish or turtle brought up the mud that became earth. Sevalal then taught the Banjaras how to trade, roam, and cook. Here, creation is tied to livelihood. The point of the myth is not just to explain the earth, but to explain why Banjaras are forever on the move.

Born from fish eggs and for buffaloes

The Dhangars, shepherds of Maharashtra, imagine that when the earth was barren, God first made sheep, then a man to herd them, then a woman to share his work. Their seven sons became the seven Dhangar clans. Creation here is pastoral. The world becomes meaningful only when there are flocks and shepherds to tend them.

The Kolis of the west coast say they were born from fish eggs. The ocean mother gave them legs so they could live on land, but their heart would always belong to the sea. For the Todas of the Nilgiris, the buffalo came before man. Humans were created just to care for the buffalo and offer its milk in ritual. For the Rabaris of Kutch, Parvati shaped the camel from desert clay and asked Shiva to give it life. The Rabaris came next, to guide the camel across the desert sands.

Each myth reflects its geography. Sea myths make us children of the ocean. Mountain myths make us keepers of buffalo. Desert myths make us guardians of camels. River myths, like those of the Mundas, speak of Singbonga, who sent birds to fetch earth from the cosmic sea so that rivers, forests, and humans could appear.

Pithora painter Mansingh Dhanji Bhai at work; and a Gond artwork. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & WIKI COMMONS)

In the Nicobarese tale, a giant crab lifts the land out of the ocean, and humans are made from the soft inner wood of the first tree. The Lepchas of Sikkim say Kanchenjunga was the first mountain, and its melting snow made the first river, whose clay was used to fashion humans.

Respect for ecology

These myths are not just about cosmology, they are about ecology. They teach us to respect the sea, the forest, the mountain, the desert, the river. They locate human identity in relation to animals – fish, birds, buffalo, camels – and in relation to work, such as painting, singing, herding, trading.

In some Brahmanical myths, the world is created for the sake of *yajna*, sacrifice. In tribal myths, the world is created for the sake of relationships: with nature, with animals, with each other.

In these many beginnings, we find not one truth but many truths. And perhaps that is the real gift of India – that creation is not a single Big Bang, but a thousand small songs, each sung in a different tongue, each rooted in a different soil, each pointing to a different way of being human.

Devdutt Pattanaik is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.

GOREN BRIDGE

Delicate play

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

North's hand is typical for a modern-style vulnerable pre-emptive raise in competition. This is very common for today's tournament players, but less so for social players. South's decision to bid game was on the aggressive side, but reasonable.

The contract needed careful handling.

South won the opening spade lead with his ace and would have failed if he took the trump finesse right away. East would have won and returned a trump, and the losing diamond finesse would have defeated the contract. Instead, South ruffed a spade in dummy at trick two, led a club to his ace, and led another spade. He ruffed with dummy's seven of hearts. Had East stated with a doubleton spade and the eight of hearts, South would have needed a successful red-suit finesse to make his contract. The seven won the trick as East followed suit. A diamond to the queen now would have been fatal, as West would have won and led a heart. South correctly led a diamond to his ace and ruffed his last spade with dummy's ace of hearts. A low heart from dummy now started the process of drawing trumps. South eventually lost one heart, one diamond, and one club to make his contract. Nicely played!

NORTH
♠ 7
♡ A 7 4 3
◇ 9 6 5 2
♣ J 9 8 6

WEST
♠ Q J 10 9 6
♡ 5
◇ K J 4
♣ K 10 5 3

EAST
♠ K 5 4
♡ K 8 6
◇ 10 8 7 3
♣ Q 7 4

SOUTH
♠ A 8 3 2
♡ Q J 10 9 2
◇ A Q
♣ A 2

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♡	1♠	3♡*	Pass
4♡	All pass		

*Pre-emptive

Opening lead: Queen of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

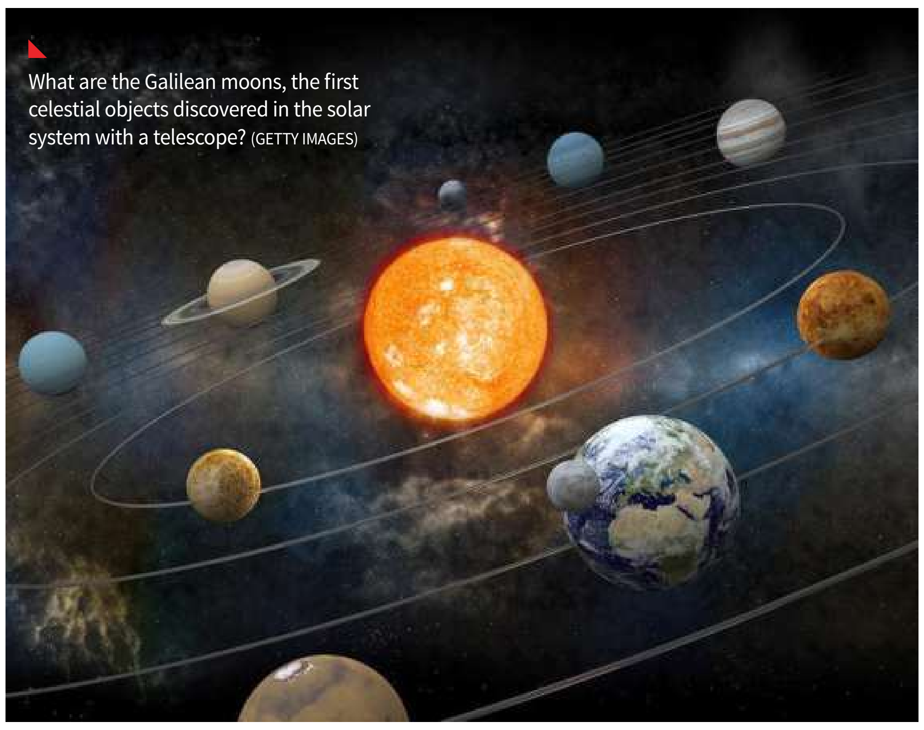
All you need to know about Galileo

Berty Ashley

1 February 15, 1564 is the birthdate of Galileo Galilei, the Italian polymath. He was responsible for advancing astronomy, physics, and mathematics in his lifetime. Despite this, he spent the last nine years of his life under house arrest by the Catholic Church. What did he do to earn this punishment?

2 In 1586, Flemish scientist Simon Stevin described an experiment in which he dropped two balls of lead, one 10 times heavier than the other, from a height of 30 feet. Both fell at the same time, disproving Greek philosopher Aristotle's claim that heavier objects fall faster in proportion to their weight. Galileo planned to do the same experiment using the unique properties of which famous landmark in his hometown?

3 Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens invented this device in 1656 based on the principles discovered by Galileo. He came up with the idea after watching a chandelier swing across a room. What was this invention that was a huge leap forward in time-keeping?



What are the Galilean moons, the first celestial objects discovered in the solar system with a telescope? (GETTY IMAGES)

4 In July 1609, Thomas Harriot pointed a telescope at the moon for the first time and was surprised by what he saw. Four months later, Galileo did the same and was the first to realise what he was seeing. What was this?

5 Galileo was also the first to notice that in the initial days following a new moon, a mysterious secondary light appears on the moon that does not come directly from the sun. It wasn't until 359 years later that astronauts aboard Apollo 8 saw it in person when orbiting the moon. What is this unique lunar phenomenon?

6 The Galilean moons are so called because Galileo was the first to have seen and recognised them. Till 1892, they were the only ones, but now there are 91 more. These were the very first objects discovered in the solar system with a telescope. What are they?

7 Since 3 BCE, an idea for this device has existed, but it was in 1593 that Galileo discovered the specific principle of the device and built it. It was a simple glass tube with clear liquid and small glass vessels. He was able to show that the density of the liquid changed under certain conditions and could now be visualised. What did he create?

8 Giovanni Faber, a friend of Galileo's, was curator of the Vatican Botanical Garden. Galileo showed him a device with a concave and convex lens, which he called 'little eye'. What name did Faber suggest, which is what we call the device now?

9 In 1610, Galileo became the first person to observe this iconic entity with his telescope. He first thought it was a new planet. The next time he tried to view them, they had disappeared and then reappeared. He noted them down as 'ears'. What was this, which became apparent only after his death?

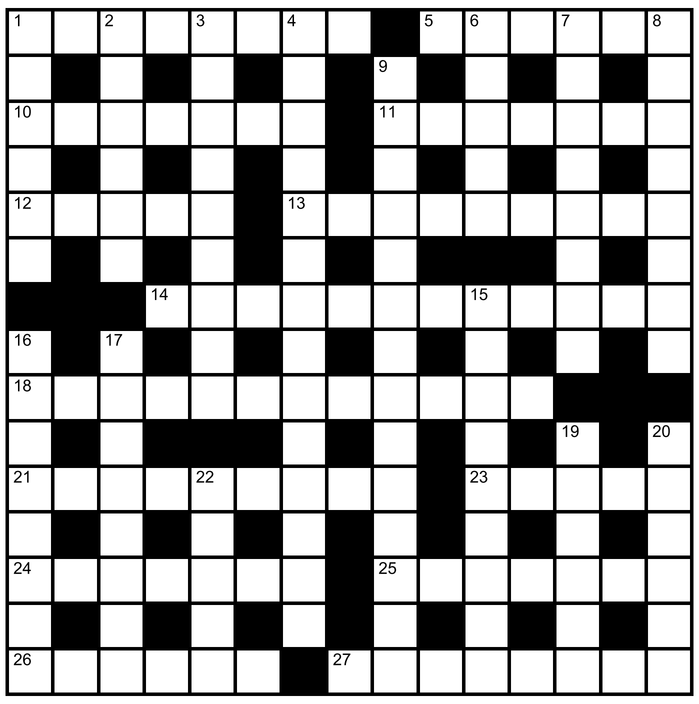
10 In 2021, Galileo became the only scientist other than Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, to be mentioned in *Rolling Stone*'s iconic '500 Greatest Songs of All Time'. Newton and Darwin appear in R.E.M's 'Man on the Moon' ranked at no.389. In which song, ranked no.17, is Galileo mentioned?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. He said that the earth revolves around the sun and not vice versa.
2. The Leaning Tower of Pisa
3. Pendulum clock
4. Craters on the moon
5. Earthshine (light of Earth rising over the lunar horizon)
6. Jupiter's moons
7. Thermometer
8. Microscope
9. Rings of Saturn
10. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by Queen

***THE HINDU* SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 43** (set by Arden)



Across

1 Other ways to occupy dead ruin (3,5)
5 One who leads not a school of fish (6)
10 Business acquires original plays and music (7)
11 A small car is for small intestinal roundworms (7)
12 Cut shooter into two parts (5)
13 German song describes love in a single lounge (3,6)
14 The objective of a church rebel could be a contentious issue among the public (5,7)
18 Financial resources trail leaves uniform lines (5,7)
21 Form shows current state is traditional (9)
23 Old South American is preserved (5)
24 It reduces visibility — starts raining and later cold wind (7)
25 Royal without guard — essentially put at risk (7)
26 Cut equal sides for a change (6)
27 Brief binge drinking — peg knocked back (8)

Down

1 Crop destroyer not even once overcome by hunger (6)
2 Call from the centre of town for chicken (6)
3 Supplement application shortly before closing time (9)
4 Difficult to predict the outcome — so collect a tool anyway (3,5,2,4)
6 Bring on as part of the main curriculum (5)
7 Upsets by means of unusual burst (8)
8 Feels sorry about other side as they're left behind (8)
9 Elk running around capital hill? Don't worry, relax (4,1,5,4)
15 Harry appealing for a bonus (9)
16 Tailor not even many pieces to make a sample (8)
17 Crisis at random during an early period of earth's history (8)
19 First of all, one can try reducing one's individual duty (6)
20 Relatively short to go up — it's clear (6)
22 By Saturday, Yen sees an upswing (5)

SOLUTION NO. 42

P		V		B		R		F		I		D		R
A	C	E	T	A	T	E		U	N	N	E	R	V	E
T		R		R		V		R		F		E		A
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S	P	A	T	E		T	E	S	T	C	A	S	E	S
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S	T	E	W	A	R	D		E	A	R	L	O	B	E
K		R		L		E		R		F		N		T

Learning from life's failures

Kattamreddy Ananth Rupesh
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I recently made the last attempt at an examination and failed to clear it by just 0.33 marks. I had taken this examination four consecutive times, and with this attempt, I have now exhausted all chances. It has become clear that I may never formally do what I aspired to, despite sustained effort and commitment.

Many of us encounter similar situations in life. At certain junctures, we prioritise one goal above everything else. We invest our time, energy, and emotional reserves into it. We give it our heart and soul, convinced that success will justify the sacrifice. Yet, sometimes, despite genuine effort, things do not materialise. Outcomes do not always reflect intent, preparation, or perseverance.

At the moment of failure, the goal appears overwhelmingly important; almost defining what we are. However, as time passes, life often takes an unexpected turn. What once felt central may gradually lose its relevance as new paths emerge. We may find ourselves doing something entirely different, something we never initially envisioned. With hindsight, the earlier setback no longer holds the same weight it once did.

The most difficult part is navigating that immediate moment of disappointment; the break from a long-held aspiration.

It is hard to accept that certain paths no longer exist, especially when we feel we did everything within our capacity. This turbulent phase demands emotional resilience, which is far harder to cultivate than professional competence. No matter how strong we pose ourselves to the world, that stingy feeling of being left out hovers.

Over time, after encountering multiple bottlenecks, we often choose an alternative path, or sometimes, a new path chooses us. Effort does get rewarded, though not always in the way we expect or on the timeline we desire. Life unfolds amid countless variables, many of which remain beyond our control, and no amount of preparation can eliminate uncertainty entirely – whether it is an examination, an interview, a stage performance, or a simple everyday task.

In fact, as someone once observed, the story of a human life is best told through its failures. A person who has experienced setbacks and disappointments often has far more to pass on to the next generation than someone who achieved everything effortlessly in one attempt. Failure humbles us. It teaches perspective. It reminds us that effort is meaningful even when outcomes differ from expectations.

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Is it okay to be ambitious?

Yes, if it's about excelling at what one is doing, and not about power, privilege, position or wealth

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I first thought about ambition in high school, after reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Brutus and his fellow conspirators justify assassinating Caesar, arguing that he was becoming too ambitious – that his growing hunger for power posed a threat to the Roman Republic. In the famous funeral oration that follows, Mark Antony sets out to defend Caesar. With devastating irony, he lists Caesar's actions: refusing the crown when it was offered, weeping for the poor, filling Rome's coffers with spoils. Did these amount to ambition, asks Antony rhetorically. "Ambition," he asserts, "must be made of sterner stuff."

In Shakespeare's telling, ambition is therefore a negative trait: a moral failing that corrodes judgment. Caesar, Antony insists, was not ambitious in that sense. This was also how my parents understood ambition. Wanting to excel at what one is doing was admirable; craving for power, privilege, position or wealth was reprehensible. I was brought up to despise ambition. In later years though I realised that this view was incomplete. Ambition is also understood in a positive sense. It denotes aspiration, striving for difficult goals and a drive for success. We urge young people to be ambitious; institutions speak proudly of ambitious plans; employers seek ambitious candidates; leaders set ambitious goals. The world would be a poorer place without ambition.

My own understanding of ambition has been shaped by experience. I now see a critical distinction between ambition driven by outcomes and ambition driven by validation. The first is about achieving results, improving performance, building institutions and contributing to the collective good. The latter is about external rewards – status, wealth, awards, accolades, and glory. The former is not only acceptable but necessary; the latter is corrosive and needs to be shunned. With this distinction in mind, I have no qualms in admitting that I was ambitious throughout my career. I set demanding goals, worked hard to meet them, and felt genuine disappointment when I fell short. When I stepped down as Governor of the Reserve Bank of India in 2013, I found myself saying to a friend, "I have no further ambition." I realised almost immediately that I had misspoken. What I meant was that I was no longer in a hierarchy where success is measured by how high you climb. Ambition in another sense – to do useful work, to do it well, and yes, to do it better than others – had not vanished. Yet, our misgivings about ambition persist. At a family gathering some time ago, a grandmother asked a 10-year-old boy what he wanted to be when he grew up. The child replied that he wanted to play in World Cup Cricket. What followed was a pause, a faint smile, and then a gentle caution: "That's fine, but don't become too ambitious." Everyone nodded, as if a great truth had been told.

Continuing unease

I was unsettled by this exchange. Was this a kindly attempt to protect the child from disappointment? A reminder that ambition has to be proportionate? Or was it a deeper warning – that wanting something too intensely was itself undesirable? That conversation captures our continuing unease with ambition. We admire success, but we distrust desire. We encourage children to do well, but not to want too much. Ambition, we believe, must be in check, lest it tip over into something morally suspect. Part of the confusion arises because we use a single word to describe two very different motivations. Ambition driven by validation encourages constant comparison and perpetual dissatisfaction. I have seen talented people pin their entire self-worth on a single reward or recognition. When it does not come, disappointment hardens into resentment, draining joy from work that once felt meaningful. By contrast, some of the most admirable people I have known are ambitious in quieter ways. I once met a schoolteacher in a far-flung village who told me that her ambition was to see some of her students get into the IIT. Similarly, a doctor in a rural dispensary focused on reducing infections, an entrepreneur trying to improve a product for the sheer joy of achievement, and young IAS and IPS officers in the vast hinterland of the country toiling against all odds to promote welfare and wellbeing are all ambitious in an admirable way. Their ambition is real and exacting, but it is directed at achieving something worthwhile rather than craving for recognition or reward. So, is it okay to be ambitious? Yes, provided we are clear about what we are ambitious for. Like fire, ambition can help or destroy. Used well, it lights the way forward; used badly, it burns the hand that holds it.

(The writer is a former RBI Governor)

When waiting becomes work

How unpaid waiting time and algorithmic management affect lakhs of gig workers

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FILE PHOTO

Waiting rarely looks like work, especially when it happens on a phone screen. But for millions of gig workers, it is the longest part of the job.

On December 25 and 31, thousands of gig workers across Indian cities logged out in protest, demanding fair wages and better working conditions. Platform companies, however, insisted that operations continued "at record pace" unaffected by the call for strikes. This response in itself shows how India's gig economy is built on the assumption that labour is endless and replaceable. Thus, collective action by workers rarely disrupts platform business models which are sustained by surplus manpower.

According to NITI Aayog, India currently has around 7.7 million gig and platform workers and this number is projected to rise to 23.5 million by 2030. Yet this explosive growth has not translated into decent earnings. A recent study by delivery platform Borzo across 40 cities found that nearly 78% of delivery workers earn less than ₹2.5 lakh annually. For many, even this figure conceals long hours, unpaid waiting time, and mounting work-related costs.

Platforms advertise gig work as flexible – log in when you want and work where you choose. In practice, flexibility is largely illusory. Logging in at the "wrong" time or in a low-demand zone drastically reduces earnings and logging out before completing incentive thresholds can change a day's income. Thus, workers end up shaping their lives not around personal choice, but around algorithmic demand curves, surge windows, and opaque incentive slabs.

The most invisible component of this labour regime is unpaid time. Gig workers are paid only for "completed tasks". Hours spent logged in, waiting for orders, waiting for customers to take that order from them or remaining alert for pings go uncompensated. The result is prolonged shifts spent chasing incentives that often recede just as workers approach them.

Dictated by algorithms

Despite being classified as "independent contractors", gig workers are tightly managed by algorithms that control order allocation, earnings, incentives, and deactivations, often without explanation. Under the guise of market forces of demand and supply, targets change overnight, incentive structures shift without notice and penalties are imposed without much recourse. Low and uncertain pay is compounded by costs that workers themselves must absorb: fuel, vehicle maintenance, depreciation, accident risks, health expenses, and the absence of paid leave, pensions or job security. The platform's flexibility, in effect, is subsidised by the workers' precarious existence.

In addition to this, the ability of a platform economy to retain its workforce cannot be read as a natural indicator of fairness of the system. Rather, it exposes the helplessness of workers who remain tethered to it due to limited alternatives. These include those who are drawn in by low entry barriers but locked in by a broader failure of the labour market to absorb them elsewhere.

The new labour codes have given some hope to the gig workers in the form of formal recognition, contribution of 1-2% of turnover by aggregators to a social security fund, eligibility for government-notified insurance, and the formation of an expert committee under the National Social Security Board. However, despite recent reforms, core protections such as minimum wages, Provident Fund, and formal grievance mechanisms remain out of reach.

If India is serious about regulating platform labour, reforms must go beyond this. Three steps are essential. First, a minimum guaranteed pay for logged-in hours. Compensating workers for active availability, not just completed tasks, would recognise waiting time as labour. Second, algorithmic transparency and accountability. Platforms must be legally required to disclose how earnings, incentives, penalties, and deactivations are determined. Third, provision of formal grievance mechanisms. The recent strikes highlight how companies deflect grievances using targeted incentives to fragment worker solidarity instead of addressing underlying concerns.

The December strikes were not isolated disruptions. They were signals of a deeper structural imbalance. Gig workers are labourers whose vulnerability is engineered through algorithms, legal ambiguity, and market logic. Until waiting time, algorithmic control, and hidden costs are acknowledged, in law and in practice, India's gig economy will remain flexible only for platforms, not for the people who keep it running.

magazine
THE 'LUNATIC FRINGE' GOES TO BERLIN

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

The screening of *In which Annie gives it those ones* at Berlinale Classics highlights how global platforms continue to value artistic efforts. ('The 'lunatic fringe' goes to Berlin'; Feb. 8) In India, independent cinema struggles for visibility amid multiplex-driven commercial priorities. While content diversity has expanded digitally, theatrical spaces remain skewed, raising urgent questions about cultural representation, audience access, and the future of serious cinema.

N.S. Reddy

The article captures well the film's spirit of linguistic freedom, campus dissent, and resistance to homogenisation. One small concern is that, beyond limited theatrical release and film festivals, such independent works often remain inaccessible to a majority of Indian audiences. Now with streaming platforms, perhaps broadcasters could arrange a wider online showing for the film.

A. Myilsami

It is exhilarating that a 1989 campus cult comedy film has entered Berlinale 2026. It is a milestone for both Pradip Krishen and Arundhati Roy.

G. Ramasubramanyam

Power of words

Barbara Kingsolver rightly says that good literature can make a reader compassionate. ('Kingsolver in Kolkata', Feb. 8) A well-told and engaging story can persuade one to think, provide a new perspective of life and expand horizons, making life more meaningful.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

As Kingsolver suggests, fiction allows us to step outside our own lives and inhabit another person's world. When we return to ourselves, we are subtly changed — better able to see the world around us with new clarity.

S. Sundareswara Pandiyan

Star talent

In our highly competitive film industry, one needs to be exceptionally gifted to carve a niche, and Reble has done exactly that. ('Meet Reble: India's rising rap star'; Feb. 8) Rap stars like her are a rage with Gen Z that enjoys fast, foot-tapping numbers.

C.V. Aravind

Tech takeover

Sending and receiving messages on WhatsApp, even for minor matters, is in vogue. ('Hello, are you there?'; Feb. 8) It has completely taken over our time and energy. Let's wait and watch out for the invention of yet another '...minator' which could be even more dreadful.

Ratna Naidu

Design forward

I am proud to see Indian culture has created opportunities for designers to develop innovative collections that attract customers in the West. ('Taking India to Beverly Hills'; Feb. 8) Indian designers based abroad have a unique understanding of international tastes, enabling them to confidently launch ventures that garner attention from global fashion designers.

Sajna Hameed

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The right to walk
Lax enforcement of traffic rules makes life more difficult for pedestrians
Ibrahim Rasoolmohideen

The subtext in a used book
The meanings of an underlined sentence, a note in the margin
Yaksha Shetty

Whose road is it anyway?
What urban roads teach us about power, space, and who gets to claim them.
Aayushi Das

The terminal
When flight cancellation led to a prolonged stay at the airport
C.V. Sukumaran

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(Clockwise from below) A sculpture by Italian artist Lorenzo Quinn at an earlier edition of Venice Biennale; four of India's five artists — Alwar Balasubramaniam, Asim Waqif, Skarma Sonam Tashi and Ranjani Shettar — with Amin Jaffer; and the fifth artist Sumakshi Singh. (GETTY IMAGES, JOE HABBEN AND SUNDER RAMU)

VENICE BIENNALE

FINDING INDIA IN 'MINOR KEYS'

Art historian Amin Jaffer is curating India's Venice comeback, with five artists whose practices reflect on ideas of home, memory, and transformation

Gayatri Rangachari Shah

It's been seven years since India had a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Last week, at the India Art Fair in Delhi, the Ministry of Culture announced its return – sharing the artists and theme for the country's official pavilion at its 61st edition.

While the Venice Biennale's overarching theme is *In Minor Keys*, India's pavilion is called *Geographies of Distance: Remembering Home* and is curated by Amin Jaffer, the Indian-origin curator whose career includes senior roles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Christie's. Currently based in Venice, Jaffer is also Director of the Al Thani Collection, artworks spanning the ancient world to the present.

The pavilion will feature works by five India-based artists – Alwar Balasubramaniam, Sumakshi Singh, Ranjani Shettar, Asim Waqif, and Skarma Sonam Tashi – connected through their sustained engagement with materials. "My initial proposal followed the single-artist model typical of Venice, but the Ministry felt that India's diversity called for a multi-artist project," says Jaffer. "I expanded the proposal, selecting artists whose messages were consistent so that visitors would come away with a clear voice." The practices of the five artists collectively reflect on ideas of home, memory, and transformation.

India's pavilion is supported by the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC) and Serendipity Arts Foundation. I spoke to Jaffer, while he was in Delhi, about his curation and what it will communicate to an international audience. Edited excerpts:

Question: *What was the core curatorial idea guiding this pavilion?*

Answer: Each national pavilion is a different project. The pavilion is meant to reflect the overall theme of the Biennale, which this does very concertedly. The 2019 pavilion was about Gandhiji; this pavilion is rather different. It's a message and a story that is applicable to and representative of India, but not unique to India.

The notion of home, change, continuity is one that's been of academic interest to me since the beginning of my education. The very first article I published was on continuity and identity in the Ismaili community, which is my community – I wrote that when I was 19. I'm a member of the Indian diaspora – I feel very Indian, but I was born in Rwanda, my mother comes from Kenya, and I've spent a lot of time in North America and Europe.

I thought of the project as very autobiographical. I grew up in two family houses, my mother's and father's. Both are now not lived in. They'll both be demolished eventually. The idea of the erasure of the past, physical changes, memory, future, these are the things that have been playing in my mind. It's a theme that's very prevalent in art today, the question of where we belong.

> **What is remarkable about Indians** is that they retain their sense of Indianness. So many people say to me, you've been six generations in Africa. How come you feel so Indian? I'm not unique in this. Indians retain this deep attachment to their values, to the sense of family, to language, to food. The pavilion needs to reflect this
>
> AMIN JAFFER

Q: *What is the theme* In Minor Keys?

A: On the piano keyboard, the major keys are triumphant, dominant, strong, and the minor keys are elegiac, introspective, delicate. When creating a project in minor keys, I felt, we have to look at minor materials. They should not have technology, complex metal, and overpowering technologies. We should be using materials that are fragile, ephemeral, that have a sense of organic origin about them.

My particular mission was to ensure that our artists work with materials that are a part of Indian civilisation. We should use techniques associated with our culture. Bala, working with terracotta, for example – terracotta sculpture goes back to the beginnings of Indian civilisation. Sumakshi working with thread; it's the basis of the Indian economy and a part of the independence movement. Ranjani works with traditional techniques coming out of Karnataka to make flowers. The giving of flowers, the garlanding of somebody, is closely tied to our culture. Asim with bamboo, a material that's part of our civilisation, but also a material used in scaffolding and the building tradition in India. Conceptually, this is what the project is about.

Q: *What aspects of India did you most want this pavilion to communicate to an international audience?*

A: We want to have a pavilion that means something to everyone who walks through the door. This is why I chose a theme that is particular to India, but is universal. What's important is that India be well positioned in an important pavilion, by artists who reflect the originality and integrity of art practice in the country today.

In India, there is a rapid rate of change in physical space... Old ways of living are replaced by new, old architecture by new. India has 15 million new people every year. There are new townships, cities, neighbourhoods. India is today the fourth largest economy in the world. Could the CEO of Chanel have been an Indian 40 years ago? We've seen a complete transformation in the identity of Indians and the way Indians are seen around the world.

Q: *Since the pavilion's announcement, there has been some discussion about whether someone based in India might have been better suited to curate it.*

A: Living in Venice for many years, I dreamed that I would be involved with an India pavilion. It's something I've discussed over the years with curators, with Biennale authorities, with successive friends who've worked in an official capacity in the Indian government. It is a sense of great personal achievement, pride, national pride. I'm 100% genetically Indian. I eat Indian food. I listen to Indian music. I celebrate Indian things. I have an OCI status, but I'm an international person. I would say more and more that's the case with Indians today. You talk to anyone in India, they have a brother in Los Angeles or a sister in Chicago. I don't think that creative vision, sentiment, artistic expression are defined by geographic boundary.

Geographies of Distance *will show at the Venice Biennale from May 9 to November 22.*

The interviewer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.

Sprinting through IAF in Delhi

For those who couldn't make it to India Art Fair and its parallels, a recap of who showed what and the ones that made an impact

Maanav Jalan

More than 50 art exhibitions opened in the capital in time for, and alongside, the India Art Fair (IAF). These were in addition to the stacked calendar of private dinners, parties and receptions hosted for the art world which congregated in the city. Since its establishment in 2008, IAF has successfully carved out a moment in the cultural calendar for its home city. A coordinated slot when the work taking place privately in artist studios, collections and archives comes out in public view.

Defence Colony's growing set of well-regarded galleries opened shows on the same evening (two days before IAF), as is now tradition. Pieces of Mumbai and Chennai were lodged in GallerySKE and PHOTOINK. Artist Sudarshan Shetty's film, *A Breath Held Long*, highlighted Mumbai's alternating quiet and deafening roar, and upstairs, photographer Ketaki Sheth captured Bollywood and Kollywood's 80s-90s film sets in black-and-white photographs, with the familiar faces of Rekha, Dilip Kumar and Kamal Haasan caught between takes.

Dodiya and Kallat give pause

At Vadehra Art Gallery, veteran artist Atul Dodiya's large new paintings reflected on the experience of looking at art itself, with paintings within paintings, including viewers within the frame. A few days later, at a talk on the art market in the IAF auditorium, gallerist Roshini Vadehra revealed that the entire body of work was sold out before the exhibition even opened.

It was not possible to race through Jitish Kallat's exhibition, *Conjectures on a Paper Sky*, at Bikaner House, nor digest it completely. It was useful instead, to pick one topic or motif and follow its evolution through the artworks made over the last decade. Take space governance. Large 'sheets' of the 1979 UN Moon Treaty prohibiting the national ownership or military use of the moon were crumpled and strewn at the entrance, as if a wasted idea. Later, a woven tangle of highway signs included distances to planets and galaxies alongside those to cities such as Melbourne and Rishikesh. Here was an artist "asking how the world is known, measured, and imagined", as curator Alexandra Munroe, of the Guggenheim, explained.

From Weiwei to Mehta

On the opening day, the fair's aisles were dotted with museum heads and private collectors. Galleries such as Vadehra, David Zwirner and Rajiv Menon Contemporary reported to have sold many, if not most, high-value works available in their booths.

(Clockwise from left) A Tyeb Mehta artwork; Revathi, Kamal Haasan and Gautami on the set of *Thevar Magan*, by Ketaki Sheth; and Kaimurai's installation. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The next day, a packed room at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) listened to iconoclast Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei speak during his first ever visit to India – spanning his life, dissident work, and India's political economy viz-a-viz China. The conversation was hosted outside the museum's newly opened retrospective exhibition of Tyeb Mehta, a champion of Indian modernism best known for his auction-record-breaking paintings of *Kali* and *Mahishasura*.

Among Mehta's quotes scattered throughout *Bearing Weight (with the lightness of being)* was one emphasising the importance of Indian art to have a dialogue beyond national borders – "minding one's business would be suicidal in our situation," he wrote to his friend and contemporary, Krishen Khanna. As if taking cue, the museum has been working vigorously with arts organisations internationally. It recently announced a new director, Manuel Rabate, currently finishing his time at the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi, and who will oversee KNMA's expansion into a new sprawling million-square-feet building in Delhi.

Craft gets its due

Artworks that explore the history and delicacy of textiles travelled from the Cheongju Craft Biennale in South Korea to the National Craft Museum & Hastkala Academy. Notable highlights were a series of flags produced by Korean artist Young In Hong working with a women's craft community in Kutch, and in an almost hidden second room, Bengaluru-based artist Kaimurai's almost-devotional installation of indigo-dyed cloth.

At IAF, conversations on craft have been ongoing for many editions now. It adopted 'design', a sister-field to art, as a dedicated section two years ago. This year, artist Natasha Preenja, also known as Princess Pea, was awarded the first-ever Swali Craft Prize, an initiative by Karishma Swali and the Chanakya Foundation alongside the fair to create support for those renewing handcraft traditions.

Focus on the grassroots

Adjoining the halls dedicated to commercial galleries, a tent was assigned to non-profit organisations and special artist projects. Sidhant Kumar showed *Studies from a Quiet Harvest*, his long-term research into heavy-metal pollution in West Delhi, in the Prameya Art Foundation booth. *Breathe*, an installation by Mumbai artist Teja Gavankar, had a thatched structure that moved like gills, 'breathing' in response to visitors' weights when they sat on a hinged bench.

Arthshila, a newly opened industrial building close to the IAF grounds in Okhla, captured the past 50 years of the leading edge of Indian contemporary art. Some of the most remarkable works by artists supported by the Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation were curated across the building, talking to one another across generations.

The conclusion of the fair week means much-awaited rest for those working behind the scenes. But many of the exhibitions remain open for the rest of us to catch in the months to come. And outside the gallery spaces, don't miss the 10th Lodhi Art Festival.

The writer is an arts professional.